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AUTHOR White, Melvin R.
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ABSTRACT

From the beginning, readers theatre performances generally have been held in academic or theatrical settings and have relied heavily on literary scripts. Now, readers theatre performers are finding a wider range of audiences and materials for their use. Among these special audiences are elementary and secondary schools, schools for the physically and mentally handicapped, prisons, retirement homes, churches, and recreational camps. These varied audiences have prompted performers and teachers to look for new sources of materials and to develop their own without relying on traditional literature. (FL)

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UNUSUAL USES/AUDIENCES FOR READERS THEATRE *

by

Melvin R. White

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* This paper was delivered on April 15, 1982, at the American conference of the Communication Association of the Pacific, University of Hawaii at Manoa, Honolulu, Hawaii

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Melvin R. White
583 Boulevard Way
Piedmont, CA 94610

ABSTRACT OF "Unusual Uses/Audiences for Readers Theatre"

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In the early years of Readers Theatre, a literary script was invariably present. As more and more unusual uses and/or audiences for group reading are being found, less literary materials are sometimes used.

These uses include teaching English as a foreign language, reading by elementary school students, performances in churches and temples, for high school graduation exercises, presentations by and for senior adults, for educable mentally retarded students and the physically handicapped, and many others. Most of these make use of created scripts rather than with literature from the printed page.

From time immemorial, departments of speech have provided reading hours, usually student performances of materials on which they have worked in oral interpretation classes. From the 1940's, increasingly these have included literature performed by two or more readers in addition to the usual solo readings of poetry, prose, and drama. Then, following the 1951 production of "Don Juan in Hell" by the drama quartet which featured four popular actors: Charles Boyer, Sir Cedric Hardwicke, Charles Laughton, and Agnes Moorehead, and the impetus provided by the appearance of the first textbooks on Readers Theatre, STUDIES IN READERS THEATRE in 1963 and the first edition of READERS THEATRE HANDBOOK: A Dramatic Approach to Literature in 1967, both by Leslie Irene Coger and Melvin R. White, your speaker, group readings of literature became commonplace. In these beginnings a literary script was invariably present, with emphasis on the sharing of the intellectual, emotional, and sensory experiences inherent in the literature. This is still true today in most instances, but more and more unusual uses of Readers Theatre are being found -- or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that more and more Readers Theatre presentations are planned for unusual audiences. This has resulted in some instances in the use of less literary materials.

These special audiences have included elementary and secondary schools, schools for the blind and the deaf, prisons and other correctional institutions, retirement homes, churches, recreational camps and other such facilities, as well as performances by the blind,

the deaf, other handicapped individuals, senior adults, and students at all educational levels. From the beginnings of Readers Theatre as we know it today, this technique has been used extensively in the teaching of foreign languages, and especially in the teaching of English as a foreign language.

For teaching English as a foreign language: Teachers of Spanish, French, and other languages introduced group reading activities in their classrooms. Often advanced classes performed adapted materials for beginning classes, or vice versa. But it is in the area of the teaching of English as a foreign language that greater use has been made of Readers Theatre. A pioneer in this area is George P. McCallum. Among his many published books in this special field of teaching is his early PLAYS FROM AMERICAN LITERATURE: For Students of English as a Second Language.[2] In the introduction to this 1962 anthology, he wrote:

> The teacher may carry the perfecting of a performance to any point he wishes, but he should remember that the reading of the text and the recordings done by the students serve the purpose of providing the students with an opportunity to improve their conversational English, not to present an award-winning drama. The teacher should at all times help the students to hear their pronunciation and intonation errors, and, of course, try to correct them. The group's ability in English will enable the teacher to determine how much time should be spent on each presentation. 3

The same goals exist today: vocabulary building, gains in intonation, pronunciation, tense usage, word order, expressive speaking, thinking in a new language, and, perhaps, growth of bicultural sensitivity. Readers Theatre makes use of the seemingly innate desire of most of us to "make believe," to "play like" or perform; this results in students working individually on their lines, developing their roles, and re-

hearing enthusiastically with members of the group. "As students work together to adapt, rehearse, and eventually perform their scripts, they have learned in the process new vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar, sentence structure, use of idioms, and an appreciation of another culture and its literature. They have been tuned into the sound and flow of the language. With new confidence gained from this kind of study, the student is able to free himself of concern about speaking or reading aloud and to channel his energies toward effective communication in the foreign language."[4]

In elementary schools: Readers Theatre has proved a delightful way to enrich the cultural life of children. From the demonstration performance of Roald Dahl's "James and the Giant Peach," at the 1965 Florida convention of the then American Educational Theatre Association, there has been increased activity in adapting and presenting materials for children. Some of these are produced by secondary school, college, and university students; some, by community theatre groups. A few institutions such as the University of Central Florida, Orlando, have established regular touring companies which visit elementary classrooms in towns in the area. Others such as California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, arrange special performances on campus which bus-loads of students attend as field trips. For example, in the spring of 1978, two Children's Drama classes presented double-cast productions of "Little One-Eye, Two-Eyes, and Three-Eyes," "Cinderella," "Gertrude McFuzz," "The Pumpkin Giant," "The Elephant Child," "Peter and the North Wind," "The Giving Tree," "Star Thief," and "The Bear's Vacation." in a total of 108 performances. True, such productions are so widespread now they can hardly be called unusual

anymore. However, in recent years, many elementary school teachers, in addition to welcoming visiting Readers Theatre performers in their classrooms, use performances by their own students as a classroom activity. Some even cast older children to present stories to younger ones. Such "mini-Readers Theatre" programs of group readings of stories, plays, or poetry, useful in the teaching of elementary school literature, often are performed in school assemblies, in other classes "on tour," and at PTA meetings.

For those not able for reasons of inexperience, busy-ness, or business to provide their own script materials, many Readers Theatre arrangements of children's stories are now available through play publishers, especially Contemporary Drama Service and Readers Theatre Script Service.[5] For example, Contemporary Drama Service, Inc., includes "Martin and the North Wind" in READERS THEATRE SAMPLE PACKET # 1; "Aesop's Fables" in READERS THEATRE SAMPLE PACKET # 3; "Cinderella," "The Pumpkin Giant " and "One-Eye, Two-Eyes, and Three-Eyes" in STORIES FOR CHILDREN I by Melvin R. White; "The Elephant's Child," "Waldo, The Giant," "Urashima Taro," and "The Reluctant Dragon " in STORIES FOR CHILDREN II by Melvin R. White, as well as such longer plays as "The Wizard of Oz,""Glendenna's Dilemma," and "The Velveteen Rabbit."

In the church: Shortly after the first edition of Coger and White, READERS THEATRE HANDBOOK, was released in 1967, hundreds of copies were ordered by various church groups, and no longer can one refer to Readers Theatre in church as unusual. Actually, it is a "natural" for church communication, has proved an effective tool in bringing a new dimension of worship to the congregation and as a medium for evangelism and church outreach. "It has enlivened Bible studies, enhanced a variety of existing church programs and activities, provided light entertainment for banquets, youth meetings, camps, and rallies, and has been used for traditional Easter, Christmas, Thanksgiving, and other special holiday performances. It has made more meaningful prayer and dedication services to edify the believer, and has highlighted missionary convention to honor faithful service and to call for commitment of lives to world needs."[6] In short, Readers Theatre has become a faithful and devoted servant to the church. "Experimental forms of worship service have become commonplace in the Reform movement in modern Jewish denominations. Temple Judea (Tarzana, California) and Temple Beth Tikvah (Columbus, Ohio) are two synagogues that have used Readers Theatre techniques to enhance their worship services," Todd V. Lewis wrote in his "Historical Antecedents of Readers Theatre in Jewish Worship Services."[7] He concluded his article, "The freshness and vitality of such a Readers Theatre liturgy removes the worship service from the realm of bland recitation. Variables of the traditional group recitation format are proving useful, informative, and inspiring to the modern Jewish congregation.

Readers Theatre in the religious service offers new possibilities for the continuing educational and spiritual uplifting of the members who attend and identify themselves with the Jewish faith."

An invaluable source of Readers Theatre materials for use in the worship setting is Contemporary Drama Service, Inc. (see footnote # 5 for the address). Their catalog, Christian Participation Resources, includes many Readers Theatre scripts such as "For All Men" by Patricia Spencer; "Martin Luther and the Reformation" by James E. Valentine; "It All Began. . ." by Harry H. Schanker; "Everyman II" by Philip Bernardie; "The Ripening Harvest" by Marion Fairman and "Let Us Give Thanks" by Melvin R. White, Thanksgiving materials; and for Christmas, White's "Christmas Comes But Once a Year" and "While Shepherd's Watched Their Flocks." The special textbook, Gordon C. Bennett's READERS THEATRE COMES TO CHURCH, is out-of-print, unfortunately. Anyone interested in dramatic expression in the church might well seek out a second-hand copy, as it is an invaluable source of ideas and materials, including eleven sample scripts. His collection of short Readers Theatre pieces, HAPPY TALES, FABLES AND PLAYS, John Knox Press, is available.

For educable mentally retarded students: Teaching EMR students to read is very difficult, usually. Specialists in this area have found that arranging materials appropriate to the abilities of the students for group reading often sparks interest and effort. As one EMR teacher told the speaker, "I'm driving myself up the wall every night writing dialogue scripts we can cast and read in class. But the students love it -- and, for the first time, I honestly feel I'm accomplishing something, increasing my kids' ability to read, something most of them hate even to try to do."

Olivia McBain, counselor and instructor for the EMR classes at San Leandro (CA.) High School, in her article, "Readers Theatre for Educable Mentally Retarded Students," stated her main objectives in employing Readers Theatre are ". . . to develop hand-eye coordination and skills in reading, writing, and spelling, as well as heightened comprehension and expanded thinking skills."[9] Her approach was to relate the lessons to a specific script she had prepared, and involve all the students actively, working through the script for performance. Observing that performance is a "delightful culmination for any group," she concluded: "Incidentally, this project is an excellent means of getting parents out to open house. They sincerely appreciate and enjoy seeing their children perform -- an activity too seldom accomplished by EMR students."[10]

For the physically handicapped: In the early years and sometimes today, Readers Theatre approached its materials by the stools and stands route, readers seated on stools, and scripts supported on lecterns, with no movement required. In the same manner, physically handicapped persons find they can be confined to a chair or wheelchair, keep their scripts in their hands, and perform skillfully even with their disabilities. Here the technique of offstage focus works admirably. The requirements of presentational staging with emphasis on "action of the mind" make such performances easy to handle. In fact, Readers Theatre is a useful medium for the paraplegic whose wheelchair may previously have denied activity in the performing arts. In Readers Theatre, the physical appearance of the readers is deemphasized, and metaphysical movement is substituted. Thus physical disabilities are not of necessity handicaps. William Rickert holds, "A performer in a wheelchair can do virtually everything an able-bodied performer can do seated on a stool."[11]

For his report on the unique "Rolling Stock Company" of Wright State University, see "Readers Theatre on Wheels,"[12] It contains many practical suggestions, based on their experiences, on selecting and adapting materials for cast members with disabilities, stage movement during performances by the handicapped, casting, hazards and surprises. You'll find it inspirational with its comments such as, "Personae throughout literature think, feel, speak, imagine, and remember. whether they do so standing up or sitting in a wheelchair is immaterial."[13]

For secondary school graduation exercises: San Leandro (CA.) High School graduating classes have chosen on six occasions since 1974 to write and perform Readers Theatre shows in place of student graduation speeches. Students in Kenneth Soares' speech classes, having experienced a unit of Readers Theatre therein, decided to dramatize a history of their class and present this in place of the usual speeches. This has proved popular with both the students and the parents attending the graduation exercises.

For television production: Since Readers Theatre is theatre of the imagination, verbal theatre concentrating on both the sense and the sensibility of words themselves, usually performed without scenery, makeup, costuming, and other special theatrical effects, it is a natural for television, much easier to telecast than to produce a play per se. Due to such problems as copyrights and permissions, and perhaps a lack of understanding on the part of TV professionals, it is seldom done, not even on public broadcasting outlets. An exception is to be found in Atlanta, Georgia, where Chris Moser produces The Readers Playhouse on WETV, a mini-series of Readers Theatre productions. It was figured that Readers Theatre, presentational in nature, could be presented easily and inexpensively. His report on their first season, 1980-1981, "The Perils of Televising Readers Theatre or 'Get Off Me, Camera One, I'm Dying,'"[14] should be "must-reading" for anyone contemplating such a project. In it he emphasizes the importance of having a clear idea of what Readers Theatre is and sticking by it, of programming for your audience, of choosing talent carefully, of securing literary/

performance rights well in advance of production, of checking carefully with AFTRA and other unions, of knowing the limitations of the studios you'll be using, of the importance of having a full studio audience, and, above all, paying attention to details. Moser admonished, "In television, chance will ruin you. . . every chance it gets," along with, "Remember that unlike a theatre audience, TV viewers will tune you out in a minute if they're bored."[15]

For and by senior adults: From Poha Nani, retirement home in Kaneohe, Hawaii, to the Florida shores, older citizens are active in theatre work. A popular audience for college and university reading hours and for their group reading activities has always been senior adults, with performances in senior centers, retirement homes, convalescent homes, hospitals, et al. In recent years, the seniors themselves are arranging, rehearsing, and presenting their own shows. The American Theatre Association has established a Senior Adult Theatre program, but unfortunately its leaders thus far have paid only lip service to group reading, emphasizing in its publications play production per se with its problems of playing space, sets, lights, costumes, makeup, memorization, etc. This may be changing, as a session, "Readers Theatre and the Senior Adult," has been scheduled for the August ATA convention in New York. Worthwhile is their newsletter, SATIN, translated as Senior Adult Theatre Information, free for the asking:

SATIN Editors
Theatre Department
Eckerd College
St. Petersburg, Florida 33733

Many groups could be cited for their work in theatre by and with and for senior adults. A leader is the College Avenue Players of Berkeley, now well-established, supported by grants from The California Arts Council, a project of The East Bay Center for the Performing Arts, The College Avenue Adult Activity Center, The Retired Citizens Volunteer Program, The Social Service Bureau of the East Bay, and Vista College. Under the guidance of their director, Stuart Kandell, the group, ages from 65 to 85, collaborate on their own plays, have become semi-professional, perform some 40 weeks each year for elementary schools, senior centers, and retirement homes. Their titles include such plays as "The Boarding House," an original drama about older people moving to a new home, "Friends and Lovers," a play about older people in love, and "Was There Life Before TV?" a play for all ages about the past, the present, and the future. They have written special shows for elementary schools, the purposes being to break down stereotypes of aging, and to create community resources for schools with their living history programs.

Recently forty-five senior citizens attended an ELDERHOSTEL Readers Theatre class at Isomata, the University of Southern California's mountain campus, Idyllwild, under the leadership of Adele Visal, formerly a drama teacher at Hemet (Ca.) High School. She found the older folks eager to use Readers Theatre techniques, able to hold their audiences in the powers of their imaginations in the four presentations rehearsed and performed in the one-week period. Since that time, a number of other institutions have offered ELDERHOSTEL classes in Readers Theatre, recognizing the possibilities of this approach to theatre and literature.

An example of a special Readers Theatre script arranged for an older group is "THUS FAR IN 1982: 'Satire, Anyone?'" The Bay Area Readers Theatre Quartet was asked to provide a program for the Alameda and Contra Costa County chapter of Mended Hearts, a national organization the membership of which is restricted to those who have had cardiac surgery. Since such surgery is in the main performed on the not-so-young, the audience is almost entirely senior adults. An introduction pointed out; "One thing we here tonight have in common is a mended heart. With this, we've all seen quite a few hospitals with their doctors, nurses, labs, xray machines, diets, exercise programs, and all such. So we'll bring you up-to-date on hospital life, on being a patient. For example, the surgeon who performed my six-pass operation assured me I could have marital relations on a regular basis after my cardiac surgery. Now, all of my friends are saving up for the operation!" Skits were included with such titles as "Health Nuts," which dealt with the new health fad, drinking; "A Patriotic Diet," on the most insidious medical problem facing the nation today, good health; "Measure a Doctor," on the need for a specialist and second opinions; "The Waiting Game" in which Mr. Patient keeps his doctors waiting while he plays dominoes; "An Easy Diet" to sell a book, EAT AND GROW FAT; and others of the same ilk. Needless to say, the material, almost too appropriate to the members, proved hilarious.[16]

Miscellaneous: To include and discuss each and every special use or different audience would be endless. A listing of some of these would include trigger scripting, the use of Readers Theatre to elicit discussion of a particular problem, possibly to affect public policy, akin to docudramas dealing with such problems as alcoholism, drug abuse, aging, inflation, etc.; book reports via Readers Theatre; new materials, oral histories utilizing the lives and energies of nontraditional sources and performers such as the collected memorabilia and reminiscences of senior adults resulting in "living texts;" Readers Theatre for the gifted; Readers Theatre for the under-achiever; Readers Theatre for the testing of new plays;[17] and Readers Theatre in an expanded forensics program.[18] Most of these, if not all, make use of created scripts rather than with literature from the printed page. It is in this area that much experimental work is being done via Readers Theatre scripting and performance.[19]

Readers Theatre has established itself firmly in educational curricular and extracurricular life. It has grown steadily in use and acceptance during its relatively short life. Now it is in a period of even greater expansion with its new, different, and differing audiences. But one thing remains constant: there is no one way to present Readers Theatre, and that encourages continued experimentation, be it with created scripts or with literature per se.

FOOTNOTES

1. Coger, Leslie Irene and Melvin R. White, READERS THEATRE HANDBOOK: A Dramatic Approach to Literature. Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1967. 2nd edition 1973. 3rd edition, 1982.

2. McCallum, George P. PLAYS FROM AMERICAN LITERATURE: For Students of English as a Second Language. Washington, D.C.: English Language Services, Inc., 1962.

3. Ibid., vii.

4. From "Foreign Language Instruction through Bilingual Readers Theatre," Readers Theatre News, Fall/Winter '78, Vol. 6, No.1, 11.

   Several bilingual scripts are available from Readers Theatre Script Service, P.O. Box 178333, San Diego, Ca. 92117.

5. Contemporary Drama Service, Inc., Box 457, Downers Grove, IL 60515. (Address of RTSS is in footnote 4 above.)

6. From letter of Nonna Childress Dalan, Evangel College, Springfield, Missouri.

7. Lewis, Todd V., "Historical Antecedents of Readers Theatre in Jewish Worship Services," Readers Theatre News, Spring/Summer '81, Vol. 8, No. 2, p. 26.

8. Ibid.

9. Readers Theatre News, Fall/Winter '80, ol. 8, No. 1, p. 21.

10. Ibid., p. 45.

11. Readers Theatre News, Spring/Summer '80, Vol. 7, No. 2, p. 8.

12. Ibid., pp.7-8, 34.

13. Ibid., p. 34.

    Lynn Wells, Saddleback College, Mission Viejo, Ca., directed a project,"Voices and Issues of the Handicapped," funded by the California Council for the Humanities in Public Policy. The program which resulted was videotaped and broadcast on KSBR Public Radio. For information on this project, contact Professor Wells.

14. Readers Theatre News, Spring/Summer '81, Vol. 8, No. 2, pp.9-10.

15. Ibid., p. 10.

16. The Alameda Times Star, February 15, 1982, carried this news item about the special program:

Readers Theatre to give program for Mended Hearts

The Bay Area Readers Theatre Quartet will present the program at the meeting of Mended Hearts Chapter No. 84 tomorrow at 7:30 p.m. in dining rooms A and B at Samuel Merritt Hospital, Webster and Hawthorne Streets, Oakland.

They will present "Thus Far in '82: Satire, Anyone?", adapted and directed by Mended Hearts member Melvin R. White. Performers include Catherine Castle of Alameda, past president of the California Speech Arts Association; Flora Isaacson, chairman of the department of speech and theatre, Laney College; Dr. Pauline Nelson, San Francisco State University, co-director of the Northern California Oral Interpretation Festival, and Dr. White.

Mended Hearts is a national organization comprised of people who have undergone heart surgery, and their families. The motto is "It's great to be alive and to help others," as all are grateful for the second chance to live a full life. Since its inception in 1951, Mended Hearts has grown to over 12,000 members and 106 chapters throughout the country including the Hawaiian Islands.

17. The Inner City Cultural Center Readers Theatre of Los Angeles, California, provides a forum in which new plays are tested. The group has presented 103 new plays in which some 1497 actors have appeared.

18. McKinleyville (CA.) High School has included Readers Theatre as part of its forensics program for twelve years. This has grown from minor mid-week performances to major productions involving the jazz band, the school choir, and thirty or more readers.

19. Much hullabaloo is being made about "interpretation in social contexts." (See Issues in Interpretation, Vol. 4, # 3, 1981, for seven articles on the subject.) It is the opinion of your speaker that this is merely an emphasis on the aged and basic concept that one chooses material appropriate to a particular audience. So if one provides Readers Theatre productions for "such settings as prisons, nursing homes, retirement centers, houses of worship, parks and recreational areas, hospitals and medical schools, and half-way houses," to quote K.B. Valentine, page 1 of Issues in Interpretation, splendid and why not? These may be unusual uses of oral interpretation/Readers Theatre, but if the material chosen for presentation is appropriate to the people (audiences) in such "settings," I repeat, splendid. One may use less familiar written literature, may create scripts from sources other than printed literature, use unusual materials for unusual audiences, and why not? I agree with Ted Colson of North Texss State University who wrote: "Rather the social contexts approach should merely expand the possibilities of performance,and instill an increased incentive for student preparation as new audiences are discovered or created." (Issues in Interpretation, pp. 11-12.)